

Sermon - April 19th 2020

Evensong - Easter 2

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

Just before lock-down, Phil created a little pond in our grand-daughter Jasmine's garden to house some refugee snails and frog spawn from our own pond. She's been watching out eagerly for the appearance of tadpoles ever since, but was saddened to report about two weeks ago that something was wrong. The frog spawn had disappeared, and the surface of the pond was covered with a dusty film. Consolingly, Phil explained the surface dustiness was a part of the process and that as exactly the same thing had happened here, there was hope because he had just that morning seen tiny tadpoles in our water. Jasmine was not to be convinced by Grampy's experience; as far as she was concerned, there was nothing to be seen, the pond was empty and so she moped, certain that her dream of frogs in the garden was at an end.

Then, on Easter Sunday, just after we'd shared face-time with the family, asked about the

pond and had witnessed a despondent shrug, there was an excited voice message from her. Tadpoles had been spotted... not one, not two but a host of tiny creatures, all alive, squirming and doing well. Seeing was believing and, all doubt gone, Jasmine was delighted.

Today, we remember Thomas, arguably the most famous doubter in history. The story of his reluctance to accept the resurrection of Christ without concrete proof is one repeated every year on this second Sunday of Easter. Against the continuing background of our own physical lockdown, we empathise with the disciples, as St John tells how, after the resurrection, they, too were locked down, fearful to go out except perhaps for supplies, fearful of what the future held. Some had seen the resurrected Jesus, but Thomas, who had somehow missed the main action, insisted on asking awkward questions. It was as if he were suffering a spiritual lock down, because he could not take that leap of faith without seeing.

We know very little about Thomas. He was probably Galilean, often referred to as Didymus, suggesting he was possibly a twin, and he was one of the original 12 apostles called by

Jesus. Mark, Matthew and Luke all mention him, but it's in John's gospel that Thomas speaks and we're given clues as to his character and personality. Although he undoubtedly loved Jesus and was eager to follow him, even to die with him, he nevertheless wanted clarity and asked the questions that others dared not.

Thomas wasn't ---- and isn't ---alone in his disbelief. Mary couldn't understand the empty tomb, despite what Jesus had taught; the men she called didn't believe her and Peter had to run to see for himself. According to a recent poll, among Christians in Britain who regularly go to church today, 5% do not believe in Jesus' resurrection. What sets Thomas apart is not that he lacked faith, but that he had the courage to express his doubt. As Jasmine refused to accept the presence of tadpoles in our pond, wanting her own instead, Thomas refused to say that he had understood something he had not. Once he realised that the other disciples had had an experience he hadn't shared, he wasn't afraid to ask for his own experience of God. When Jesus offered him what he needed to free him from his lock down, his profession of faith was

unequivocal– “My Lord and God”. He lived the rest of his life in service to Christ; indeed there is a strong tradition that it was Thomas who took the gospel message to India.

Later this week, on April 23rd, we'll celebrate another saint, St George, who is the patron saint of England, mythically remembered as a valiant soldier, who killed a fearsome dragon. Watch out for more about him on the St. Botolph's daily posting next Thursday. George died as a martyr during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian. George and Thomas could not have been more different – the one a figure of “derring-do”, a sort of action man, riding to the rescue of those in danger and the second, doubtful and insisting on asking awkward questions. Yet we celebrate both, men who believed in Jesus Christ enough to give him their lives, but who came to faith in different ways. Thomas, who lived alongside Jesus for three years, heard his teaching and his promises, and witnessed his miracles, still doubted until he saw the marks of the nails. George was one of those of whom Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Many of us will have come to faith in very different ways --- some believing without seeing, some having had very personal encounters with Christ, and some, many of us perhaps, a mixture of both. And many of us have had our own moments of doubt and dark questioning, our own times of spiritual lockdown. The message of hope for us in our gospel reading is that Jesus knows all about those times. He knows us as he knew those early disciples. He knew them by name and he knew exactly how they had responded at the time of his crucifixion; who had fled, who had betrayed him, who had disowned him and who had disbelieved in him. Yet, his first words to them after his ordeal were not words of recrimination. Instead, he called a name, “Mary”. Instead he said, “Greetings – do not be afraid.” And to the group of fearful followers huddled together in a locked room he said, “Peace be with you.”

Thus, Jesus promised that despite any abandonment, denial, unbelief and fear on the part of the disciples, he would remain with them, for he loved them. His words signalled his forgiveness and his continued trust in them. Those who had doubted God’s power and promises were to be given the living presence of

God in the form of his Holy Spirit and were being sent out to carry his message to others. Thus gifted with a deep faith, they inspired thousands more, who had not physically seen Jesus, but whom came to meet him in other ways and finally to know him as their Lord and God.

George was one such Christian, whose knowledge of Christ came through the influence of others, but faith enabled him to face his death steadfastly, so conquering both the dragons of doubt and fear. Thomas shows us that doubt is not the opposite of faith – fear is. When we don’t express our doubts, we don’t allow Jesus to reach out to give us what we need. It really is alright to say, “I find it hard to believe.” Jesus was with Thomas in his darkness and he cares enough for us to be with us in ours, too.

Locked down as we are, physically and maybe spiritually, certainly locked out from our church buildings, we are still the church in the world. We are called, just like the disciples, to be the place and the people where those who come to seek the Risen Lord find the new life that God offers to all of his creation. We’re the same flawed beings as Jesus’ first followers, having come to faith in many different ways. We have

the same weaknesses, doubts and fears and we have dragons and lockdowns and technological challenges of our own to face. But Christ can use us still, tells us not to be afraid and gives us his peace. What hinders us most is fear and the closed doors within our minds.

We give thanks for the faith of George, who did not see and yet believed. We give thanks for the faith of Thomas, who saw and believed. We give thanks for our own faith, praying that our risen Lord Jesus may breathe the breath of His Spirit upon us, giving us all we need to be his Easter people in the world today. And so we say,

Alleluia, the Lord is Risen! He is risen indeed – Alleluia!